THE FEAST OF ST. SWITHIN OF WINCHESTER

by James Branch Cabell & Mordecai Shapiro

The temple should be decorated to look like a cave (or at least be dark and relatively featureless). In the east is a large altar upon which are a paten and a cup. In the center of the temple is a small altar bearing a cake (large enough to provide a slice for each communicant), a knife, and a large bottle of red wine which has been decorated to look like a white bird whose head comes off (it symbolizes a living white hen).

Seated on elevated thrones to one side of the large altar are the children: Helmas, a red-nosed man, robed in scarlet with white fur, his crown containing a silver feather, holds a quince (or failing that, a yellow pear); at his side Pressina, with her faintly blue skin and undeniably green hair, bears an unbroken raw egg. The priest, Florian, sits on an unelevated throne on the opposite side of the large altar from the children; he is clothed in dark green and silver, and wears a fancy three-cornered hat with a flower on it. Next to the small altar stands the deacon, Hoprig, in robes of white, with purple accenting, crowned by a wreath of mistletoe and a halo. Once the guests are all seated, Hoprig purifies and consecrates the temple, then he stands in front of the large altar, facing west.

Hoprig: We are met in the temple of the Peohtes in the kingdom of Brunbelois to celebrate one last marriage according to the rites of Llaw Gyffes of the Steady Hand. Despite the fact that my recently discovered canonization has forced me to resign my former office as high-priest of Llaw Gyffes, I, holy St. Hoprig, shall officiate here today because my successor as high-priest has not yet been appointed. Therefore, *(bows briefly toward children)* by the grace of King Helmas and Queen Pressina of Brunbelois, I call upon Lord Florian, fourth Duke of Puysange, to arise and stand here before me.

Florian leaves his throne gracefully and poses nonchalantly in front of Hoprig, projecting an air of superiority.

Florian: I am Florian de Puysange.

Hoprig: And are you acquainted with those ancient usages by which we in Brunbelois insure the preservation of domestic tranquility?

Florian: I fear, most holy sir, that I am not so acquainted. But I assure you that this is not from any lack of enthusiasm on my part, but rather is the unfortunate result of my having only just arrived here yesterday, that is, upon the feast day of that most holy Saint Swithin of Winchester.

Hoprig: Well then, in belated recognition of one of my so estimable colleagues you shall not be immediately disemboweled, as would be our usual practice with a bridegroom who is unacquainted with our usages. Instead you will be instructed, as if you were a mere boy, by listening here to the words of our princely sage, the honorable Lord Janicot Buckley of Poictesme, as he discourses upon the customs of our ancestors.

Lord Buckley's rap "The Chastity Belt" is played, and Helmas exits the temple; immediately after the rap ends the priestess, Melior, is ushered into the temple by Helmas. She wears upon her head a wreath of thistles, and about her middle a remarkable garment of burnished steel fastened with a small padlock; in her hand she carries a distaff, flax and a spindle. She is escorted to the side of Florian by Helmas, who then resumes his seat.

Hoprig: And are you, Melior, Royal Princess of Brunbelois, acquainted with those ancient usages by which we in Brunbelois insure the preservation of connubial bliss?

Melior: You know perfectly well that I am so acquainted Hoprig, since you yourself have often instructed me in those arts, even as recently as just last night, and rather a bit late if I do say so!

Hoprig: Be that as it may, we can now proceed, according to the ancient and primitive rites of Llaw Gyffes, to perform this marriage ceremony.

Helmas and Pressina rise and come down from their thrones. Helmas gives his quince to Florian, Pressina gives her egg to Melior, then they resume their thrones. Florian offers the quince to Melior, who takes it and eats it, spitting out the seeds into the cup, which Hoprig proffers. Then she gives the egg to Florian, who cracks and empties it into the proffered cup, and then puts the empty shell into his hat. Hoprig replaces the cup on the large altar, then walks over to Florian and whispers in his ear. Florian looks momentarily astonished, but he soon tries to reassert his appearance of complacency, speaking to Hoprig out loud, if not with confidence.

Florian: Well, let us say, ___ times. *(fill in the blank with the number of people who will take communion, that is, everyone except Hoprig)*

Hoprig uses the knife to cut the cake into the same number of pieces, and then places the pieces in the paten on the large altar. He then returns with the knife to the small altar, and taking up the bottle of wine, opens it, while making as if he is cutting off the head of a "white hen". He returns to Florian and Melior, standing at the large altar, and pours a little wine upon each of their feet. There is fanfare of trumpets and Helmas comes forward, with a great flourish, to present Florian with the key to a small padlock. Helmas remains standing next to Florian. Hoprig holds up a piece of the cake.

Hoprig: You know full well what this represents.

Hoprig hands Florian the piece of cake, which is accepted, and then eaten, only after a good bit of hesitation and coaxing. Hoprig fills up the still egg- and seed-laden cup with wine and hands it to Florian.

Hoprig: According to the immemorial custom of the rites of Llaw Gyffes and the kingdom of Brunbelois it is both the privilege and the obligation of the bridegroom to specify the particular wedding toast which he desires all assembled to offer on this momentous occasion.

Florian studies the cup in his hand queasily for a moment then, summoning his inner resources, declares himself resolutely.

Florian: Thou shalt not offend against the notions of thy neighbor!

While the guests, led by the deacon and children, join in an exuberant cry of "Hear, hear!", Florian drains the cup, gagging only slightly, then returns it to Hoprig, who refills it and hands it to Melior along with a piece of cake. She eats it, then declares "Thou shalt not offend against the notions of thy neighbor!" and drains the cup while everyone cries "Hear, hear!". Then, together, Florian and Melior take their seats, while Pressina leaves her throne and the same tasting and toasting is repeated next by her and Helmas, who then also resume their thrones together. The taste and toast is then repeated by each guest, either individually or,

if lovers, together. When at last everyone but Hoprig has communicated and resumed their seats, Helmas gets off his throne and goes over to Florian, who rises to greet him. Helmas pantomimes that Florian should accompany him and then leads his new son-in-law out of the temple. Then the deacon looks out over the entire congregation.

Hoprig: Now of course we all hope that our blissful newlyweds will always enjoy the same ecstatic happiness which they feel at this moment, but still, one must also be logical.

Hoprig takes out the key to a small padlock and hands it to Melior.

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